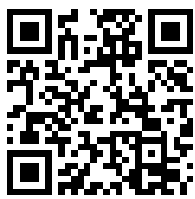
This is a reproduction of a library book that was digitized by Google as part of an ongoing effort to preserve the information in books and make it universally accessible.

Google™ books

https://books.google.com



D
772
.G7
G7
A45
1940

B 869,031

Digitized by Google

PROPERTY OF
University of Michigan Libraries
1817
ARTES SCIENTIA VERITAS

PAMPHLET BINDER
Syracuse, N. Y.
Stockton, Calif.

Digitized by Google

THE
BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE

AN ACCOUNT OF EVENTS BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER THE ACTION UP TO THE SELF-DESTRUCTION OF THE ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE

Compiled in the Admiralty from despatches forwarded by Rear-Admiral Harwood and the Captains of H.M. Ships Ajax, Achilles and Exeter

Crown Copyright Reserved

LONDON
PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE
To be purchased directly from H.M. STATIONERY OFFICE at the following addresses:
York House, Kingsway, London, W.C.2; 120 George Street, Edinburgh 2;
26 York Street, Manchester 1; 1 St. Andrew's Crescent, Cardiff;
80 Chichester Street, Belfast;
or through any bookseller
1940
Price 2*d.* net

Digitized by Google

D
772
.G7
G7
A45
1940

THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE.

"In this sombre dark winter . . . the brilliant action of the Plate . . . . came like a flash of light and colour on the scene, carrying with it an encouragement to all who are fighting—to ourselves and to our allies."—First Lord of the Admiralty when welcoming H.M.S. *Exeter*, 15th February, 1940.

The action which led to the defeat and subsequent self-destruction of the German "pocket battleship" *Admiral Graf Spee* was made up of four distinct phases. First there were the preliminary movements which made the victory possible. Secondly there was the main battle. Thirdly there was the long shadowing action while the enemy was running for the safety of neutral territorial waters. Finally there was the long watch of the River Plate Estuary, with the *Admiral Graf Spee* hourly expected to make a dash for the open sea.

In the following account of the action, which has been compiled in the Admiralty from despatches forwarded by Rear-Admiral Harwood and the Captains of H.M. Ships *Ajax*, *Achilles* and *Exeter*, all the times given are the ships time kept by the Squadron. This was two hours slow on Greenwich Mean Time.

The First Phase.

It had been known since the S.S. *Clement* was sunk on September 30th that a German "pocket battleship" was at large in the South Atlantic Ocean, and the fact that four ships on the Gibraltar to South Africa route were overdue had indicated that this ship was raiding commerce on the eastern side of the South Atlantic. In mid-November, however, the sinking of the S.S. *Africa Shell* at the southern end of the Mozambique Channel proved that there was a German commerce raider in the southern part of the Indian Ocean. Whether this was the same raider as had been operating in the South Atlantic Ocean was not definitely known at that time. In any case, vigilance in the South Atlantic could not be relaxed.

Apart from the forces concerned in a systematic search of other areas, there were in the western part of the South Atlantic four cruisers of the South America Division under the command of Commodore H. H. Harwood. Early in December it had been necessary to detach H.M.S. *Cumberland*, the largest and most powerful of the force, to the Falkland Islands to carry out a self-refit, remaining at short notice. Upon the three remaining ships devolved the gigantic task of watching and defending the immensely valuable trade routes off the South American continent. This they had to do, knowing that there was at large an enemy raider more powerful than their combined strength—even if they were able to bring their combined strength to bear upon the enemy at the moment of contact.

The British cruisers of the South America Division immediately available were:—

H.M.S. *Ajax* wearing the Broad Pendant of Commodore Harwood, a 7,000 tons cruiser armed with eight six-inch guns.

H.M.S. *Achilles*.—A cruiser of the same class as H.M.S. *Ajax*, 7,000 tons and armed with eight six-inch guns. This ship had been detached from the New Zealand Division and was manned largely by New Zealanders.

H.M.S. *Exeter*.—A cruiser of 8,400 tons armed with six eight-inch guns.

There was little doubt that the German raider was one of the so-called "pocket battleships"—a vessel of rather more than 10,000 tons with a main armament of six eleven-inch guns and a secondary armament of eight 5·9 inch guns. Moreover, the "pocket battleships" are protected by armour

Digitized by Google

against which 6-inch gun fire could not be expected to be fully effective at long ranges. The German raider, therefore, had a considerable advantage in armament. Her *secondary* armament was the equal of the total armament of one of the smaller British cruisers, and the weight of metal and explosive which she could fire in one broadside was 4,700 pounds. The total weight of the broadsides of all the three British cruisers combined was only 3,136 pounds.

Against the serious inferiority in armament, the British cruisers could put an advantage of about six knots in speed and, possibly, a greater handiness.

The two essentials to successful action against the enemy were, therefore, concentration of the British forces prior to action being joined, and the employment of tactics which would exploit the advantage in speed and handiness of the British forces. These were problems not easy of solution, because the immense area to be guarded made it necessary for the British forces to be dispersed—a factor which precluded the frequent practising of squadron tactics.

On December 3rd, 1939, the three British cruisers were scattered over two thousand miles.

It was on the afternoon of that day that a report was received from the British S.S. *Doric Star* that she was being attacked by a German "pocket battleship" on the eastern side of the South Atlantic about midway between Sierra Leone and the Cape of Good Hope. The *Doric Star* had sent out the wireless message in spite of the fact that the German raider was firing on her in an attempt to prevent her from using her wireless.

Commodore Harwood correctly anticipated that the raider, knowing that she had been reported by the S.S. *Doric Star*, would leave that area and probably cross the South Atlantic. He estimated that the raider could reach the Rio de Janeiro area by the morning of December 12th, the River Plate area by that evening or the following morning, or the Falkland Islands area by December 14th.

There was nothing to indicate which of these three areas—separated from one another by more than 1,500 miles—was the raider's objective. Commodore Harwood decided, however, that the most important area to be defended was the focal area of the large and very valuable trade off the River Plate. He therefore ordered his squadron to concentrate 150 miles off the River Plate Estuary. He also made arrangements to ensure that his ships would not be short of fuel when they arrived at the rendezvous. All this was done in one short signal, after the transmission of which no wireless communication was used, since this would have indicated the movements of British forces to the enemy.

Accurate navigation led to the concentration of the British cruisers at the expected moment—7 a.m. on December 12th.

The greatest use was made of that day. Commodore Harwood explained to his Captains the tactics which he proposed to use in the event of contact being made with the powerful raider. These tactics were then exercised by the squadron. It is noteworthy that the final words of Commodore Harwood's instructions to his Captains were to act "without further orders so as to maintain decisive gun range".

Wednesday, December 13th, dawned fine and clear, with extreme visibility. There was a fairly strong breeze from the south-east, a low swell coming from the same quarter, and a slight sea. The British cruisers were steaming east north east at fourteen knots. They were in single line ahead in the order H.M.S. *Ajax*, H.M.S. *Achilles*, H.M.S. *Exeter*.

At 6.14 a.m. smoke was sighted on the horizon just abaft the port beam, and H.M.S. *Exeter* was ordered to investigate. Two minutes later H.M.S.

Digitized by Google

Exeter reported " I think it is a pocket battleship ". The enemy was in sight. Contact had at last been made between British naval forces and the raider which they had been hunting for more than two months.

The Second Phase.

At the time of the sighting of the smoke, the *Admiral Graf Spee* and the British cruisers were steering converging courses. As soon as the smoke was identified as that of the German raider, the ships of the British squadron began to act in accordance with the tactics practised on the previous day. All ships increased speed and began to work up to full speed as rapidly as possible. The eight-inch gun cruiser, H.M.S. *Exeter*, the most powerful unit of the British squadron, made a large alteration of course to the westward, while the two six-inch gun cruisers, H.M.S. *Ajax* and H.M.S. *Achilles* forged ahead to the north-eastward, altering course slightly in order to close the range rapidly. These manoeuvres were carried out so that the " pocket battleship " should be simultaneously engaged from widely different angles. This would force him either to " split " his main armament in order to engage both units, or to leave one of the British units unengaged by his eleven-inch guns.

At 6.18 a.m. only four minutes after the first sighting of smoke, the *Admiral Graf Spee* opened fire with her main armament of six eleven-inch guns. She had " split " her main armament, and one turret fired at H.M.S. *Exeter* and the other at H.M.S. *Ajax* and *Achilles*. The range was very long, but it was being shortened rapidly by all three of the British cruisers.

Two minutes later, at 6.20 a.m., H.M.S. *Exeter* opened fire with her two forward turrets—four eight-inch guns. The range was then 9½ sea miles. Her two after guns opened fire as soon as they would bear, two and a half minutes later. This eight-inch gunfire seemed to worry the enemy almost from the beginning. After shifting target rapidly one or twice, the *Admiral Graf Spee* concentrated the fire of all six of her eleven-inch guns on *H.M.S. Exeter*. The *Admiral Graf Spee's* first salvo fell short of H.M.S. *Exeter*. The second was over, and the third straddled the cruiser.

Meanwhile H.M.S. *Ajax* and H.M.S. *Achilles* had opened fire with their six-inch guns. H.M.S. *Achilles* opened fire at 6.21 a.m. and H.M.S. *Ajax* two minutes later. These two six-inch gun cruisers immediately developed a high rate of fire, combined with great accuracy. The despatch of H.M.S. *Achilles* states that " fire appeared to become rapidly effective," while the despatch of H.M.S. *Ajax* states that " effective fire developed immediately."

At 6.23 a.m. an eleven-inch shell burst just short of H.M.S. *Exeter*, abreast the middle of the ship. Splinters from this shell killed the torpedo tubes crews, damaged the communications of the ship, and riddled the funnels and searchlights. One minute later H.M.S. *Exeter* suffered a direct hit from an eleven-inch shell. This shell struck " B " turret, putting that turret and its two eight-inch guns out of action. Splinters from that shell swept the bridge. All the bridge personnel except the captain and two others were either killed or wounded. The wheel-house communications were wrecked.

Momentarily, the ship was out of control. Good training, however, came to the rescue. As soon as it was realised in the lower conning position that communications with the wheelhouse had ceased to function, that lower position took over the steering. Even so, the ship had begun to swing to starboard, and there was danger of the after guns becoming unable to bear on the target. This was noticed by the torpedo officer, who, on his own initiative, succeeded in getting an order through to the lower conning position which resulted in the ship being brought back to her course.

The captain of H.M.S. *Exeter* was at this time making his way aft. With the bridge out of action, he had decided to fight his ship from the after

Digitized by Google

conning position. When he reached that position, however, he found that all communications from the after conning position had been destroyed. The steering was therefore changed over to the after steering position, and communication established with that position by means of a chain of messengers. H.M.S. *Exeter* was controlled in this way until the action was broken off. It would be difficult to overestimate the difficulty of controlling a ship by this means during a fierce action, with personnel exposed to eight-inch gun blast as well as heavy fire from the enemy.

During this time H.M.S. *Exeter* received two more hits forward from 11-inch shells, and also suffered some damage by splinters from shells bursting short.

Meanwhile H.M.S. *Ajax* and H.M.S. *Achilles* were making good and rapid shooting with their six-inch guns, and they were closing the range rapidly and drawing ahead on the enemy. That this six-inch gunfire was causing the enemy trouble was shown by the fact that at 6.30 a.m. the *Admiral Graf Spee* again "split" her main armament, switching over one eleven inch turret to engage the six-inch gun cruisers. This temporarily reduced the volume of heavy fire to which H.M.S. *Exeter* was subjected.

The secondary armament of the *Admiral Graf Spee*—5·9-inch guns—had been alternately engaging H.M.S. *Ajax* and H.M.S. *Achilles*, but without effect, although some salvoes had fallen close. These guns continued to fire at the six-inch gun cruisers.

At 6.32 a.m. H.M.S. *Exeter* fired her starboard torpedoes at the enemy. These torpedoes went wide, because the *Admiral Graf Spee*, apparently finding the British gunfire too hot, turned 150 degrees away under cover of a smoke screen before the torpedoes reached her.

By 6.36 a.m. the six-inch gun cruisers were doing 28 knots. This rapid increase of speed—the ships had been doing 14 knots only 20 minutes previously—reflects great credit upon the engine and boiler room personnel.

At 6.37 a.m. H.M.S. *Ajax* catapulted her aircraft. Orders to get the aircraft into the air at the earliest possible moment had been given as soon as the alarm was sounded, and the catapult had been prepared and the engine of the aircraft warmed up. The operation of preparing to catapult the aircraft was carried out with great coolness, in spite of the fact that the personnel, and particularly the pilot and the observer of the aircraft, were subjected to severe gun blast from the guns of the two after turrets, which were firing on a forward bearing. The aircraft itself was whipping about badly owing to the gunblast. As soon as the aircraft was in the air it took up a position on the disengaged bow of the six-inch gun cruisers.

At about 6.38 a.m. H.M.S. *Exeter* made a large alteration of course to starboard in order to bring her port torpedo tubes to bear on the enemy. As she was turning she received two more hits from 11-inch shells. One of these hit the foremost turret, putting the turret and its two eight-inch guns out of action. The other entered the hull, did extensive damage and started a fierce fire between decks. The observer in H.M.S. *Ajax's* aircraft reported that "she completely disappeared in smoke and flame and it was feared that she had gone. However, she emerged, and re-entered the action."

H.M.S. *Exeter* had, indeed, suffered severely from the much heavier metal of her adversary. Two of her three turrets were out of action, and the only two guns still in action were aft. All her compass repeaters had been smashed, and the captain was conning the ship with the help of a small boat's compass. What little internal communication was possible was done by messengers. Some compartments were flooded, and a serious fire was raging in her hull. Nevertheless she was resolutely kept in action. Her port torpedoes were fired as soon as the tubes were brought to bear on the enemy. A minute or two later H.M.S. *Exeter* altered course to port—that

Digitized by Google

is, towards the enemy—and hauled round so that she was on a course approximately parallel to that of the *Admiral Graf Spee* and able to continue to engage the enemy with her two remaining guns. By this time H.M.S. *Exeter* had a seven degree list and was down by the bow, but was still steaming at full power.

At 6.40 a.m. an 11-inch shell burst just short of H.M.S. *Achilles,* in line with the bridge. Splinters from this shell killed four ratings in the main gunnery control position and stunned the gunnery officer, as well as slightly wounding the captain and the chief yeoman of signals on the bridge. Fortunately these splinters did not put the director out of action or damage any important instrument. Nevertheless, the main control position was momentarily out of action through these casualties. The gunnery efficiency of H.M.S. *Achilles* was not, however, impaired. The secondary control position immediately took over the control of the ship's armament, and continued the action until the main control position was ready to resume control some minutes later. The greatest gallantry and fortitude was shown by the surviving personnel of the main control position. A sergeant of Royal Marines remained uncomplainingly at his post and carried out his duties until the end of the action although he was seriously wounded. A seaman boy behaved with exemplary coolness despite the carnage around him and continued his duty of passing information to the guns. He was at one time heard denying most vigorously a report of his own death which had spread round the ship. These were but two instances of gallantry in a fierce action memorable for the bearing of the personnel of the British cruisers.

After 6.40 a.m. the action became virtually a chase. The *Admiral Graf Spee* had turned away to the westward under cover of a smoke screen, and the two six-inch gun cruisers were hauling round to the north-westward in pursuit, accepting the fact that this entailed being unable to bring the after guns to bear on the enemy. They were by now doing 31 knots and still increasing speed. H.M.S. *Ajax* and H.M.S. *Achilles* were fine on the starboard quarter of the *Admiral Graf Spee,* and H.M.S. *Exeter* was rather before the enemy's port beam, still in action with her two remaining guns.

At 6.56 a.m. H.M.S. *Ajax* and H.M.S. *Achilles* altered course to starboard in order to bring all their guns to bear again. This greater volume of fire from these two cruisers appeared to have an immediate effect on the enemy, for the *Admiral Graf Spee* at once altered course away from the cruisers, and at 7.0 she laid a smoke screen in an attempt to throw off the British gunfire. From this time onwards the *Admiral Graf Spee* made frequent alterations of course and great use of smoke screens in her efforts to escape further punishment.

At 7.10 a.m. the range of the enemy from H.M.S. *Ajax* and H.M.S. *Achilles* was still eight miles. Commodore Harwood decided to alter course towards the *Admiral Graf Spee* in order to shorten the range as rapidly as possible, even though this meant that the after guns would once again be unable to bear on the enemy. The British cruisers were now steaming at their utmost speed.

At 7.16 a.m. the *Admiral Graf Spee* made a drastic alteration of course to port under cover of smoke. She was then steering almost directly for H.M.S. *Exeter,* and it seemed that her intention was to finish off that damaged cruiser. Four minutes later, however, the effective support of H.M.S. *Exeter's* consorts obliged the *Admiral Graf Spee* to make another large alteration of course. She hauled round to the north-westward until all her 11-inch guns would bear on H.M.S. *Ajax* and H.M.S. *Achilles,* and at once opened fire on the small British cruisers. The range at that time was 5½ miles. H.M.S. *Ajax* was straddled by 11-inch salvoes, but she was not hit. The

Digitized by Google

enemy was also firing with her secondary armament of 5·9-inch guns, but their fire had by this time become inaccurate and ragged.

At 7.20 a.m. H.M.S. *Ajax* and H.M.S. *Achilles* had turned to starboard to bring all guns to bear on the enemy. Rapid and accurate shooting was maintained, and a fire was observed amidships in the *Admiral Graf Spee*.

At this time it appeared to Commodore Harwood that the *Admiral Graf* Spee intended to neglect H.M.S. *Exeter* and to close the six-inch gun cruisers on a north-westerly course. Thinking that the enemy was likely to remain on this course for some time, H.M.S. *Ajax* swung to starboard at 7.24 a.m. and fired her port torpedoes at a range of 4½ miles. The enemy probably saw these torpedoes being fired, for the *Admiral Graf Spee* at once made a large alteration of course, turning away some 130 degrees to port and at the same time laying a smoke screen. Although the *Admiral Graf Spee* altered back to her north-westerly course three minutes later, this large alteration of course was sufficient to avoid the torpedoes from H.M.S. *Ajax*.

At 7.25 a.m. H.M.S. *Ajax* was hit by an 11-inch shell. This shell put X turret out of action, and, by a stroke of bad luck, it also led to the jamming of Y turret. Thus this one shell robbed H.M.S. *Ajax* of the use of four of her guns, besides causing a number of casualties.

It was at about this time that the pilot of H.M.S. *Ajax's* aircraft, which had been spotting the fall of shot for the six-inch gun cruisers, decided to approach the *Admiral Graf Spee* in an attempt to discover the extent of damage that ship had received. As soon as the aircraft came within range of the enemy's anti-aircraft guns, these opened fire. As the primary and most important duty of the aircraft was spotting the fall of shot for the control of the British cruisers' gunfire, the aircraft retired out of range of the enemy's anti-aircraft guns.

H.M.S. *Exeter* had been dropping gradually astern, as she had been forced to reduce speed owing to the damage forward. She still continued in action, however, engaging the enemy with her two remaining guns firing in local control under the direction of an officer standing in an exposed position on the searchlight platform. At about 7.30 a.m., however, H.M.S. *Exeter's* remaining turret ceased to operate due to flooding. Thus H.M.S. *Exeter* could no longer engage the enemy nor keep up with the action. Reluctantly, therefore, she was forced to break off the action, and at about 7.40 a.m. she turned to the south-east and steamed away at slow speed, starting to repair damage and make herself seaworthy.

That H.M.S. *Exeter* was still afloat and capable of making long sea passages is a tribute to the design and construction of British warships. For the fortitude and resolution of the personnel no praise could be too high. In spite of severe casualties and the almost complete destruction of internal communications, H.M.S. *Exeter* had been kept in action so long as a gun would fire, while fire and repair parties fought to minimise the effects of damage.

At 7.28 a.m. H.M.S. *Ajax* and H.M.S *Achilles* hauled round to a westerly course in order to close the range still further. Three minutes later H.M.S. *Ajax's* aircraft reported " Torpedoes approaching. They will pass ahead of you ". Commodore Harwood, however, decided to take no chances and the cruisers made a large alteration of course towards the enemy in order to avoid the torpedoes. This alteration of course had the effect of closing the range very rapidly. At this time H.M.S. *Ajax* had only three guns in action, as an accident prevented one gun of B turret from being fired, while both X and Y turrets were out of action as a result of the 11-inch shell hit sustained at 7.25 a.m. Nevertheless, the enemy did not relish the fire of the small British cruisers. The *Admiral Graf Spee* turned

Digitized by Google

away to the westward almost immediately, making much smoke and zig-zagging in an attempt to throw out the British gunfire.

At this stage of the action the shooting of the six-inch gun cruisers appeared very accurate. H.M.S. *Achilles* was making excellent practice with her eight guns, while H.M.S. *Ajax* was making very good use of her three remaining guns. At 7.36 a.m. the *Admiral Graf Spee* turned to the south-westward in order to bring all her heavy guns to bear on the British cruisers in an attempt to fight them off. The two small British cruisers stood on, however, and by 7.38 a.m. the range was down to 4 miles.

It was then reported to Commodore Harwood that so many rounds had been expended during the continuous periods of rapid firing that there was some danger of running short of ammunition, if the action was prolonged without reaching a decision. This led Commodore Harwood to adopt an immediate change in tactics. He considered that by breaking off the day action and shadowing the enemy till nightfall, he would have a better change of closing to a range at which his lighter armament and torpedoes would have a decisive effect.

Accordingly, at 7.40 a.m., Commodore Harwood turned H.M.S. *Ajax* and H.M.S. *Achilles* away to the eastward under cover of a smoke screen. Just as the ships began to turn, an 11-inch shell from one of the *Admiral Graf Spee's* last salvoes brought down the main topmast of H.M.S. *Ajax*. The bursting of this shell caused some casualties, and the falling of the mast destroyed the wireless aerials. Spare aerials were, however, soon rigged.

The *Admiral Graf Spee* made no attempt to follow the British cruisers, but continued to steam to the westward at a speed of about 22 knots.

After opening the range by steaming to the eastward under cover of a smoke screen for six minutes, Commodore Harwood again turned his ships to the westward and ordered them to take up positions for shadowing the enemy.

That the two small six-inch gun cruisers had not suffered more severely in the close action was undoubtedly due to the speed and skill with which the ships were handled. The engine and boiler room personnel played a most important part in the action, steaming the ships at full power under difficult action conditions with the ships under almost constant use of helm. In the boiler rooms, gun blast caused the flames to leap about a foot out of the fronts of the furnaces, yet the stokers, many of them youngsters, never paused in their work or moved back from the boilers.

The Third Phase.

The situation at 8.0 a.m. on December 13th was that the *Admiral Graf Spee* was continuing her flight to the westward; H.M.S. *Ajax* was shadowing on the enemy's port quarter and H.M.S. *Achilles* on the enemy's starboard quarter; both cruisers being about 15 miles from the *Admiral Graf Spee*. H.M.S. *Exeter* was out of sight, drawing away to the south-eastward at slow speed.

At 8.07 a.m., and every hour thereafter, the British cruisers broadcast the position, course, and speed of the German raider, so that British merchant ships in the vicinity would keep out of danger.

Just before 9.15 a.m. H.M.S. *Ajax* recovered her aircraft. The conditions were difficult, but the operation was carried out with great skill and—what was so important—without loss of time.

Commodore Harwood's objective remained the destruction of the enemy in close action after nightfall, but he had to take steps to deal with the situation which might arise if the *Admiral Graf Spee* succeeded in eluding night action. He could not risk further prolonged day action with his

Digitized by Google

superior adversary owing to the weakening of his force by the departure of H.M.S. *Exeter* and the quantity of ammunition remaining in his six-inch gun cruisers. It was necessary, therefore, to secure reinforcements so that nothing should be left to chance. The nearest British warship was the 10,000 ton 8 inch gun cruiser H.M.S. *Cumberland,* at the Falkland Islands. At 9.46 a.m. Commodore Harwood ordered her to proceed to the River Plate area at full speed. H.M.S. *Cumberland* had, however, picked up jumbled messages which indicated that an action was in progress to the northward, and she had already left the Falkland Islands on the initiative of her commanding officer before these orders were received. On receipt of Commodore Harwood's signal H.M.S. *Cumberland* increased to full speed.

Meanwhile, other operations were set on foot by the Admiralty. Orders were given for the aircraft carrier H.M.S. *Ark Royal* and the battlecruiser H.M.S. *Renown,* and other ships all of which had been operating some 3,000 miles away, to proceed at once to the South American coast, and steps were taken to ensure that adequate supplies of fuel would be available at various strategic points.

By 10.5 a.m. H.M.S. *Achilles,* who had over-estimated the speed of the *Admiral Graf Spee,* had closed the range to eleven and a half miles. The *Admiral Graf Spee* then altered course and fired two three-gun salvoes of eleven-inch at H.M.S. *Achilles.* The fact that the *Admiral Graf Spee* altered course sufficiently to bring her forward turret to bear in order to fire these salvoes suggests that the enemy's after 11-inch turret was out of action at that time. The first of these salvoes from the *Admiral Graf Spee* fell very short, but the second fell close to H.M.S. *Achilles,* which ship was already under helm. H.M.S. *Achilles* turned away at full speed under cover of a smoke screen and resumed shadowing from a longer range.

An hour later a merchant ship was sighted fairly close to the *Admiral Graf Spee.* She appeared to be stopped and blowing off steam. A few minutes later H.M.S. *Ajax* and H.M.S. *Achilles* received a signal from the *Admiral Graf Spee.* It read:—" *Ajax* and *Achilles* from *Admiral Graf Spee.* Please pick up lifeboats of English steamer."

On coming up with the merchant ship H.M.S. *Ajax* found that she was the British S.S. *Shakespeare,* and that all her boats were hoisted. H.M.S. *Ajax* signalled to her asking if she required assistance, and the S.S. *Shakespeare* replied that she was quite all right and did not require assistance. It would appear, therefore, that the signal of the *Admiral Graf Spee* to H.M.S. *Ajax* was a ruse adopted by the German raider in an attempt to shake off her tenacious pursuers.

The shadowing of the *Admiral Graf Spee* by H.M.S. *Ajax* and H.M.S. *Achilles* continued without further incident until 7.15 p.m. At this time the *Admiral Graf Spee* altered course and re-opened fire on H.M.S. *Ajax* with her 11-inch guns at a range of thirteen miles. H.M.S. *Ajax* at once turned away under cover of a smoke screen and resumed a shadowing position out of range.

By this time it was clear that the *Admiral Graf Spee* intended to enter the estuary of the River Plate.

The entrance to the River Plate estuary is guarded by a sand bank sixteen miles long, running across the estuary. This is known as English Bank. Commodore Harwood considered that the *Admiral Graf Spee* might try to elude the British cruisers and break back to the open sea by doubling round this sand-bank. He therefore disposed his forces so as to prevent the enemy slipping out. As soon as the *Admiral Graf Spee* passed the Island of Lobos, and was therefore committed to entering the estuary of the River Plate, the whole duty of shadowing the enemy devolved upon H.M.S. *Achilles,* while H.M.S. *Ajax* proceeded to the south of English Bank so that she would meet

Digitized by Google

the *Admiral Graf Spee* if she tried to double back towards the open sea after rounding the sandbank.

The sun set at 8.48 p.m. and the *Admiral Graf Spee* was, from H.M.S. *Achilles,* clearly silhouetted at a range of about twelve and a half miles. H.M.S. *Achilles* altered course to the north-westward in order to take full advantage of the afterglow. She had already increased speed in order to close the enemy before dark.

The enemy appeared to resent any shortening of the range by the British cruiser, and at 8.55 p.m. the *Admiral Graf Spee* altered course under cover of a smoke screen and opened fire at H.M.S. *Achilles* with 11-inch guns. H.M.S. *Achilles* at once replied to the German fire, turning away at full speed as she did so, and laying a smoke screen to throw out the enemy's fire and cover her own movements. The *Admiral Graf Spee* ceased firing, and H.M.S. *Achilles* at once turned to the westward again at high speed in order to keep in touch.

At 9.26 p.m. the enemy again laid a smoke screen in an attempt to throw off the pursuit. This failed, and six minutes later the *Admiral Graf Spee* fired an 11-inch salvo at H.M.S. *Achilles.* H.M.S. *Achilles* at once made a large alteration of course to port in order to throw out the enemy's gunfire. On two other occasions, at 9.40 p.m. and at 9.43 p.m., the *Admiral Graf Spee* fired single salvoes at H.M.S. *Achilles.* H.M.S. *Achilles* did not reply to these salvoes. The loom of the land, now to the north-eastward of H.M.S. *Achilles,* must have made it very difficult for the enemy to see her, and it was considered that the flash of her guns would give away her position. It seemed clear that these sporadic salvoes from the *Admiral Graf Spee* were merely attempts to drive off shadowers.

By 10.2 p.m. H.M.S. *Achilles* had closed to five miles from the *Admiral Graf Spee,* and it was possible to determine that the enemy was heading to pass to the northward of English Bank. H.M.S. *Achilles* informed H.M.S. *Ajax* accordingly.

Soon after that time H.M.S. *Achilles* found the *Admiral Graf Spee* very difficult to see owing to low clouds and patches of smoke. The British cruiser accordingly hauled to the southward in order to get the enemy silhouetted against the lights of Montevideo. This manoeuvre was successful.

At 10.48 the *Admiral Graf Spee* was observed to be about 7 miles east of the Whistle buoy at the entrance to the Montevideo channel, and it was clear that the defeated German raider was about to seek the shelter of the neutral harbour of Montevideo.

Throughout the day and the three hours of darkness the shadowing action of the British cruisers had been entirely successful, and every attempt of the *Admiral Graf Spee* to elude or drive off her pursuers had been defeated.

The *Admiral Graf Spee* anchored in Montevideo roads at ten minutes past midnight.

The Fourth Phase.

Commodore Harwood had called off the pursuit an hour before the *Admiral Graf Spee* anchored in Montevideo roads, since the enemy's intentions had been by that time clear, and the British Commander was at pains to respect neutral territorial waters.

New dispositions were at once taken up by the British cruisers. The *Admiral Graf Spee* might have taken refuge in Montevideo harbour, but there was no reason to suppose that she intended to remain there. It devolved upon the two small British cruisers to ensure that the German " pocket battleship " did not break out into the open sea, and it was clear that reinforcements could not reach Commodore Harwood for some time.

Digitized by Google

Nor were the geographical factors of the situation in Commodore Harwood's favour. The Estuary of the River Plate is 120 miles across from Cabo San Antonio, in the Argentine, to Punta del Este, on the Uruguayan coast. Out of the estuary there are three widely separated deep-water channels. The northernmost of these is between the English Bank lightship and Cumberland Shoal. The second deep-water channel, the centre of which lies thirty miles further south, is between the south end of English Bank and the north end of Rouen Bank—a large shoal approximately half way between English Bank and the Argentine Coast. Between Rouen Bank and the Argentine coast is the third deep-water channel, which is nearly thirty miles wide.

There were thus three widely separated routes by which the *Admiral Graf Spee* might break out to the open sea. Commodore Harwood had only two cruisers, and he could not hope to destroy the enemy unless they were concentrated.

There was a danger that the British ships might be surprised by their superior enemy in the dawn light, when the British cruisers would be silhouetted against the lightening eastern sky, while the *Admiral Graf Spee* would be invisible against the dark loom of the land and the offshore mists of dawn. The difficulties of the position were great, but Commodore Harwood had one vital advantage. One might expect the crews of ships which had undergone a fierce action in which they had suffered damage and casualties, and taken part in a long and arduous chase, to be in need of rest. This was not the case. The spirit of the personnel of the British cruisers was such that they showed no fatigue. It was the same spirit which animated Commodore Harwood, commanding a greatly inferior force in a dangerous and difficult situation, to begin the signal telling his ships of his intentions with the words " My object—destruction ".

Commodore Harwood reviewed the difficulties with which he was faced and determined upon his course of action. The primary necessity was to keep to seaward of the *Admiral Graf Spee* if she put to sea and at the same time avoid being caught against the dawn light. He therefore ordered H.M.S. *Ajax* and H.M.S. *Achilles* to withdraw from the River Plate and patrol well to seaward during the night and to move back into the estuary after dawn.

The night passed without incident, and as soon as the danger of being silhouetted against the dawn light had passed, the ships closed in towards Montevideo, keeping constant watch over as much of the estuary as was possible.

At 10 p.m. on that day—Thursday, 14th December—the eight-inch gun cruiser H.M.S. *Cumberland* arrived in the River Plate area, having made the long passage from the Falkland Islands in thirty-four hours. This reinforcement enabled Commodore Harwood to dispose his forces so that sectors to seaward of all three of the deep-water channels leading out of the River Plate Estuary could be watched during the night. H.M.S. *Cumberland* patrolled the centre sector, with H.M.S. *Achilles* to the north of her and H.M.S. *Ajax* to the southward. Should the *Admiral Graf Spee* come out, she was to be shadowed, and the three British cruisers were to concentrate sufficiently far to seaward to enable a concerted attack to be delivered on the enemy.

Next day—Friday, 15th December—another problem faced Commodore Harwood. His ships could not keep the sea indefinitely, with boilers always ready to drive the ships at full speed, without further supplies of fuel. The Royal Fleet Auxiliary tanker *Olynthus* was in the vicinity, and H.M.S. *Ajax* was ordered to oil from her at sea, while the operation was covered by the other two cruisers. Fuelling at sea is a difficult operation in anything but

Digitized by Google

a flat calm, and it was by no means calm. Securing wires, and even two spans of hurricane hawsers, were parted, but the fuelling was successfully accomplished.

Shortly after this, Commodore Harwood received news that the *Admiral Graf Spee* had been granted an extension of her stay in Montevideo up to seventy-two hours, in order to make herself seaworthy. Nevertheless, Commodore Harwood's despatch states:—" I could feel no security that she would not break out at any moment." The strain of watching and waiting, in instant readiness for action, could in no way be relaxed.

Before dawn on Saturday, December 16th, H.M.S. *Cumberland,* H.M.S. *Ajax* and H.M.S. *Achilles* concentrated in the southern part of the River Plate Estuary, and H.M.S. *Ajax* flew off her aircraft to carry out a reconnaissance. The pilot was told to be careful not to fly over territorial waters. The aircraft returned at 8.30 a.m. and reported that it had been impossible to see anything owing to bad visibility.

There was danger that the *Admiral Graf Spee* might take advantage of the mist and try to break out.

The British cruisers at once went to action stations and stood to the northward to intercept the enemy. Information was soon received, however, which indicated that the *Admiral Graf Spee* was still in Montevideo harbour, that she was repairing damage with assistance from the shore, and had provisioned. It was reported as unlikely that the *Admiral Graf Spee* would sail that night, but Commodore Harwood did not feel able to rely upon this report. The unceasing vigilance of the British cruisers continued and Commodore Harwood made a signal to his squadron informing the ships of his intentions in the event of the enemy breaking out during that night.

It was in the late afternoon of this day that Commodore Harwood received the Admiralty's signal informing him of the honours bestowed by His Majesty upon him and the Captains of H.M.S. *Exeter,* H.M.S. *Ajax* and H.M.S. *Achilles,* and of his promotion to Rear-Admiral to date December 13th—the date of the action and chase of the *Admiral Graf Spee.* Admiral Harwood's despatch states:—" This was a most stimulating tonic to us all, and I took steps to pass it on to H.M. Ships under my command, emphasizing the share of all concerned in the honours which their senior officers had received."

The British squadron spent that night patrolling on a north and south line five miles to the east of the English Bank light buoy.

On the morning of Sunday, December 17th, H.M.S. *Achilles* took in oil fuel at sea from the Royal Fleet Auxiliary tanker *Olynthus* while H.M.S. *Cumberland* and H.M.S. *Ajax* acted as a covering force for the operation.

The British squadron then cruised off the south-east of the English Bank, remaining concentrated and ready to take up the same night patrol as on the previous night.

That afternoon messages were received that the *Admiral Graf Spee* was preparing for sea. Admiral Harwood's despatch states:—" We all expected that she would break out at any moment. I would like to place on record the fact that at this stage the most cheerful optimism pervaded all ships in spite of the fact that this was the fifth night of waiting for the enemy."

About 5.30 p.m. on the afternoon of Sunday, December 17th, news was received by Admiral Harwood stating that the *Admiral Graf Spee* was weighing anchor. It seemed that the British expectations of action were to be fulfilled.

H.M.S. *Cumberland,* H.M.S. *Ajax* and H.M.S. *Achilles* at once altered course towards the entrance of the five-mile dredged channel leading into Montevideo roads and the crews went to action stations. H.M.S. *Ajax's*

Digitized by Google

aircraft was flown off, with orders to report the position and movements of the *Admiral Graf Spee* and of the German ship *Tacoma,* to which ship the *Admiral Graf Spee* was known to have transferred a large number of men.

The *Admiral Graf Spee* left harbour at 6.15 p.m. and proceeded slowly down the dredged channel, after leaving the end of which she turned to the westward. The *Tacoma* also weighed anchor and followed the *Admiral Graf Spee.*

H.M.S. *Ajax's* aircraft reported the *Admiral Graf Spee* in a position in shallow water about six miles south-west of Montevideo, and shortly afterwards—at 8.54 p.m.—the aircraft signalled " *Admiral Graf Spee* has blown herself up ".

The British cruisers carried on towards Montevideo, proceeding north of the English Bank. H.M.S. *Ajax* recovered her aircraft, and as she was doing so H.M.S. *Achilles* passed her. The two British cruisers which had done such excellent service cheered ship as they passed one another.

Navigation lights were switched on, and the British squadron steamed past the whistle buoy at the entrance to the Montevideo dredged channel, passing within about four miles of the wreck of the *Admiral Graf Spee.* Admiral Harwood's despatch states:—" It was now dark, and she was ablaze from end to end, flames reaching almost as high as the top of the control tower, a magnificent and most cheering sight."

While H.M.S. *Cumberland,* H.M.S. *Ajax,* and H.M.S. *Achilles* were witnessing the ignominious end of the ship which had been the pride of the German navy—which had represented Germany at the Coronation Review at Spithead, and which had carried Herr Hitler triumphantly to Memel—H.M.S. *Exeter,* who had contributed so gallantly to the *Admiral Graf Spee's* defeat, was at the Falkland Islands.

" I have the greatest pleasure in informing you of the very high standard of efficiency and courage that was displayed by all officers and men throughout the five days of the operation. . . . Within my own knowledge, and from the reports of the Commanding Officers, there are many stories of bravery, devotion to duty, and of the utmost efficiency, which show that H.M. Ships have been forcefully trained and made thoroughly ready to deal with the many and various exigencies of battle. I am submitting separately a list of officers and ratings whom I consider to be especially deserving of award. I would remark, however, that the standard throughout has been so high that the preparation of this list has been very difficult.

I would like also to place on record the honour and pleasure I had in taking one of H.M. Ships of the New Zealand Division into action, and fully concur with the Commanding Officer of H.M.S. *Achilles'* remark that ' New Zealand has every reason to be proud of her seamen during their baptism of fire.'

Further, it is most satisfactory for me to be able to inform you that the machinery and equipment of H.M. Ships proved to be of the highest efficiency, and well able to stand up to the prolonged strain of battle.

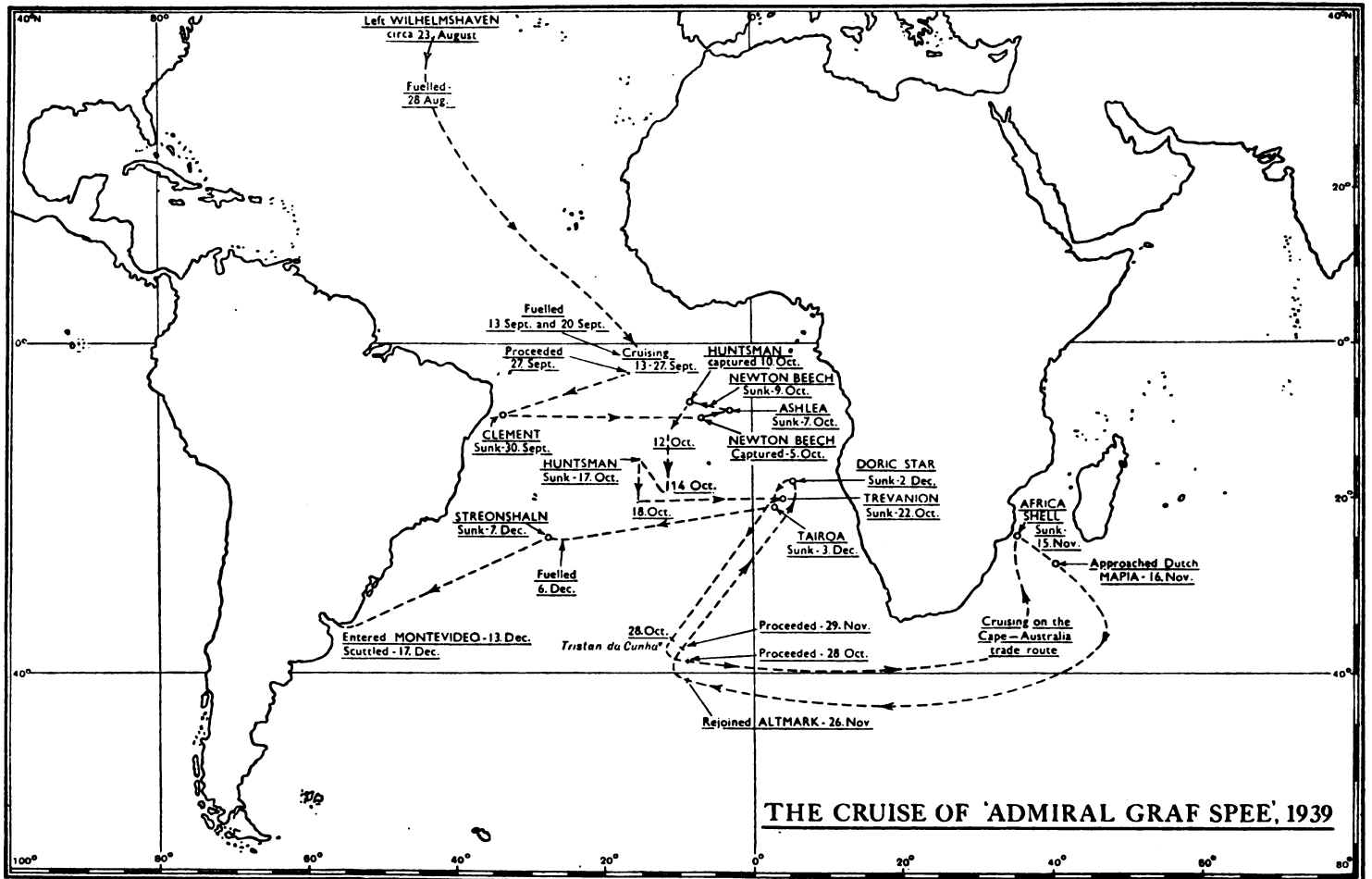
The main impression left on my mind is of the adequacy of our peace training. Little that had not been practised occurred, particularly among the repair parties."—*Admiral Harwood's despatch.*

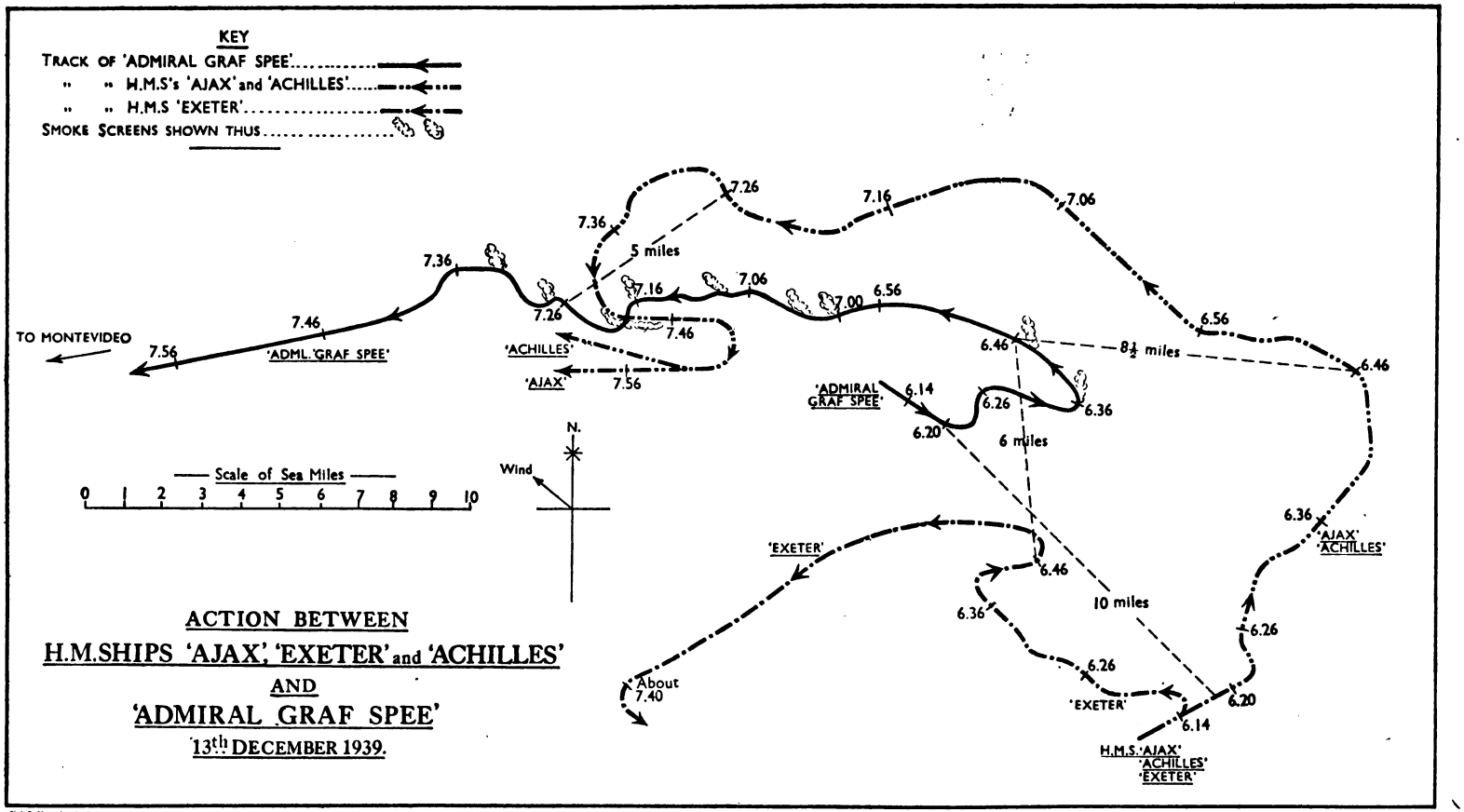
ENCLOSURES.

(1) Chart of *Admiral Graf Spee's* cruise.
(2) Track chart of the action of December 13th, 1939.
(3) Plan of the Estuary of the River Plate.

(5/40) (249271) Wt. 1537— 5000 6/40 P. St. G. 344

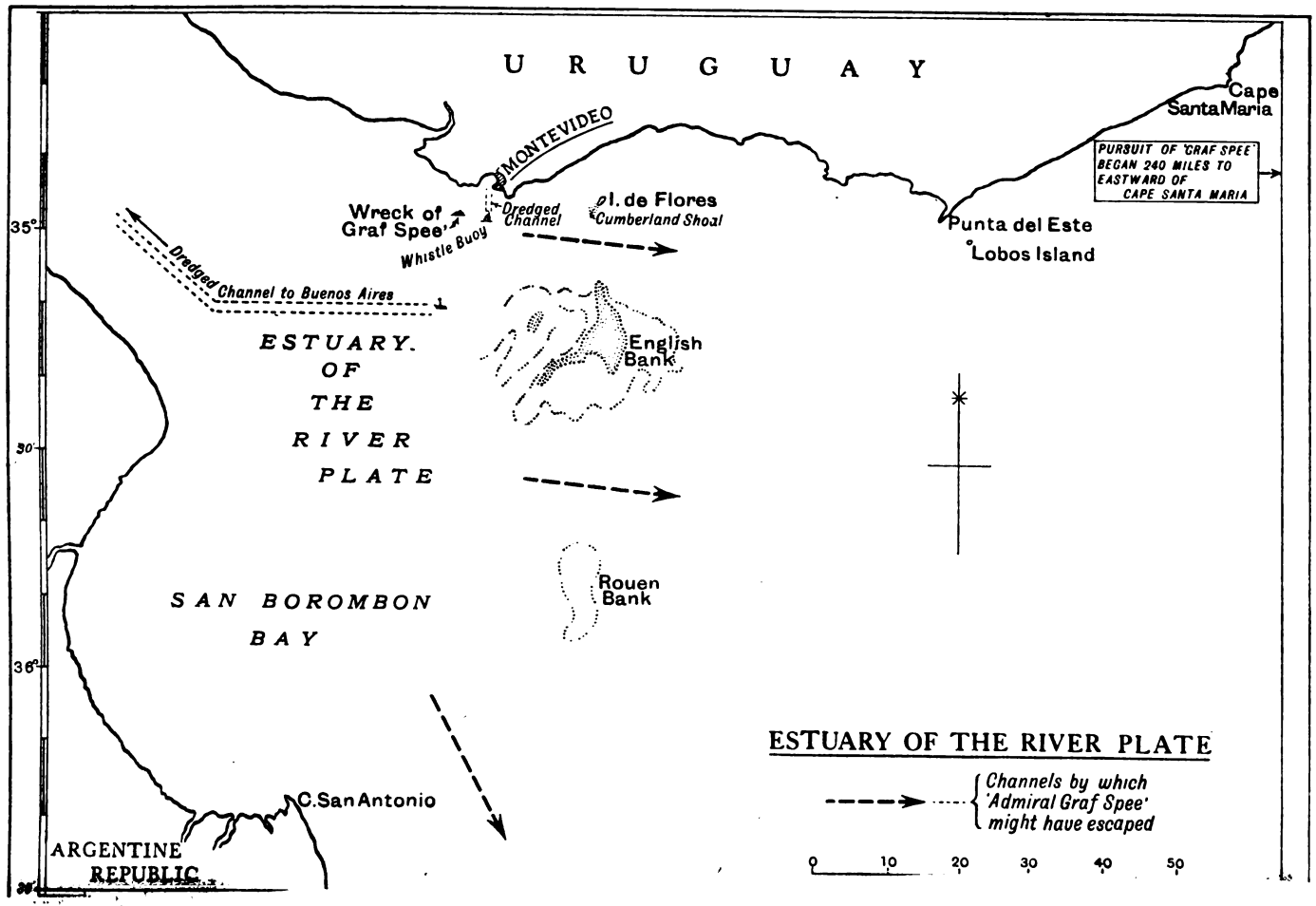
Digitized by Google


Left WILHELMSHAVEN
circa 23. August
Fuelled-
28 Aug.
Fuelled
13 Sept. and 20 Sept.
Proceeded
27. Sept.
Cruising
13-27. Sept.
HUNTSMAN
captured 10 Oct.
NEWTON BEECH
Sunk-9. Oct.
ASHLEA
Sunk-7. Oct.
NEWTON BEECH
Captured-5. Oct.
CLEMENT
Sunk-30. Sept.
12 Oct.
HUNTSMAN
Sunk-17. Oct.
14 Oct.
18. Oct.
DORIC STAR
Sunk-2 Dec.
TREVANION
Sunk-22. Oct.
STREONSHALN
Sunk-7. Dec.
TAIROA
Sunk-3. Dec.
AFRICA SHELL
Sunk-15. Nov.
Approached Dutch
MAPIA-16. Nov.
Fuelled
6. Dec.
28. Oct.
Tristan da Cunha
Proceeded-29. Nov.
Proceeded-28 Oct.
Cruising on the
Cape—Australia
trade route
Entered MONTEVIDEO-13. Dec.
Scuttled-17. Dec.
Rejoined ALTMARK-26. Nov
THE CRUISE OF 'ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE', 1939
N I D. March 1940



N.I.D.March 1940.

Digitized by Google



S.O. Code No. 20-9

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google